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AS SEEN BY AN OLD MAID GRUNDY

BY FRANCES MATHILDA ABBOTT

WHEN I was a little girl it was one of my delights to look at the pictures in my grandmother's scrap-book. She must have begun it in her youth for it was full of small colored prints of women in the costume of the First Empire. It was a never-failing wonderment to me, accustomed to the *chignons*, the crinolines and the flounces of the Second Empire, and later to the enormous trains and bustles of the seventies, that any human being could ever have worn the scanty slips, half-way to the knees, that encased the female form at the beginning of the nineteenth century. With the single exception of the poke-bonnet, over which a perpendicular feather waved, the garb was almost precisely what we see around us to-day. There were the low shoes, sometimes with crossed straps; the bare arms and necks in street attire; the big muffs and loose scarfs; the gowns that outlined every movement of the wearer.

I used to ponder the problem. It could not have been a fairy tale for the pictures were said to be drawn from life. Years later, when I had some knowledge of history, I learned of the astonishing vagaries to which the costume of civilized man, meaning especially woman, has been subject; but I do not think I was ever really convinced of the actuality of my grandmother's pictures till I saw the costumes exhibited among the family relics in the Longfellow house at Portland. There were limp crape gowns which could have been passed through—let us say, a bracelet; but I have heard of some that could go through a finger ring. *Sotto voce*, I wonder if we shall ever see any of the dimensions of a needle's eye. I believe that it is a well attested historical fact, though I blushed when I first read it, that Betsey Patterson, after she had intrigued Jerome

Bonaparte into marriage, went to the altar clad in a single garment of embroidered muslin.

Those reflections were suggested by a recent article in one of our venerable monthlies in which the writer, who calls herself a Grundy Cousin, indulges in some strictures on the dressing, dancing and general behavior of the modern *débutante*. I hold no brief for many aspects of modern female attire. In fact the chief comfort I can get out of the situation is to remember the motto that the Arab king engraved upon his signet ring: "This too will pass." But let us consider the matter a little.

This last summer I sailed around one of the most beautiful lakes in New England. As we approached the wharf of a well known hotel, which, though fashionable, has always piqued itself on the fastidiousness and high standards of its *clientèle*, I saw a joyous group ascend the ladder to the roof of the boat-house. From there they leaped to the upper deck of our steamer. After they had warmed themselves at the smoke-stack, for it was a cold day, they took a high dive into the water. One of the figures was unmistakably feminine. She was clothed—I blunder like a man when describing feminine fashion—in—possibly it was an Annette Kellerman bathing-suit——no, suit means more than one garment. At any rate, the obvious feature was that from a few inches below the thighs to three inches above the ankles she was *in puris naturalibus*. Her knees looked as battered as those of little children, who are constantly falling down.

When our boat came back in the afternoon this same young woman, clad in the same costume, was seated, with companions, on a projecting log of the wharf. The only change she had made was to fling a woollen scarf over her shoulders. For aught I know she may have gone to luncheon in the hotel dining-room thus attired. The outstanding fact of the exhibition was that neither she, her companions nor the miscellaneous crowd of spectators on the wharf appeared conscious of anything unusual or worthy of remark. It made me think of one of Kipling's stories where an Englishman, stationed in a remote South Sea island with no companion but a native, finally went mad on account of the solitude and tore off all his clothes. He had been in this condition two years when a ship arrived and the men were shocked to find him raving in

his nudity. His companion, being a native, had noticed nothing amiss.

My thoughts went back to my own youth. When I was a child I wanted to learn to swim, the most healthful and necessary exercise any featherless creature can be taught. But such action was not for girls in my day. When I went to college the only gymnastics were lady-like calisthenics. To be sure, it was the first woman's college in the country; but though it took courage to go, even in my day, I belonged to the fifteenth class. It was not till nine years after my graduation, that the alumnae built what was then a modern gymnasium with a swimming-pool. It made a great deal of talk; for, if I remember rightly, it was the first swimming-pool for women in the country—certainly the first connected with any educational institution. And this was just thirty years ago.

To go back to college. In my student days amateur dramatics, as ever since, were a prominent feature of social recreation. The girls gave many plays, some of them very well done, all things considered. What impressed me most was the costume for the male parts. Whatever the character, Puritan or Cavalier, general or common soldier, banker or bandit, the lower part of the costume was always a gymnasium skirt, and the gym. skirts of those days would not be noticed on the streets to-day. I suppose that the modern college girl will not believe this; but then I can never make the modern girl understand that the higher education of woman was ever in doubt.

This hermaphrodite costume of the local stage puzzled me exceedingly. If a girl could wear the shoe-buckles, the wig and the full-skirted coat of a Colonial magnate or the high boots and red shirt of a cowboy, why must that ridiculous skirt always intervene? Why not adopt the proper costume in full or else wear feminine attire and leave all to the imagination? There were no masculine spectators except a few elderly, married members of the faculty. I ventured to intimate my doubts to one of the younger authorities and was promptly frowned upon and made to think my suggestions were highly improper. And yet Maria Mitchell was a member of that faculty.

Still another leaf from memory's note-book. During a Christmas vacation we unfortunate stay-overs held some harmless revels. It was a sort of costume-party. No one

was present but ourselves and the feminine dignitary in charge. My room-mate, a particularly sedate, well behaved girl, made herself a pair of full, black, cambric bloomers to represent—I have forgotten what character. She ventured into the assembly in this attire. We were all masqued. My innocent and unfortunate friend was immediately pounced upon by the acting matron of the occasion and sent to her room in disgrace. Since then I have attended a woman's camp where at a Sunday religious service under the pines, with several men in attendance beside the preacher, some of the women appeared in their camp costume of bloomers which reached but to the knee.

It is said that the youths of to-day will not dance with a girl who wears a corset. That sounds a little shocking till we remember that forty years ago the ideal for which the most high-minded and strong-minded dress-reformers were shouting was the abolition of the corset. People who are old enough to recall the laced waist and exaggerated bust and hips of the seventies and eighties will realize that it took as much courage to appear in a natural figure then as it does to wear Ground Gripper shoes now.

To go into the subject more intimately. An interesting old lady once confided to my youthful ears this bit of historical information. She said that in her day no girl wore—let us call it the bifurcated lower part of the present combination. She clearly recalled the horror and astonishment when a young cousin of hers, who had been visiting somewhere, brought home a pair of the abominable things and announced that it was the new fashion in undergarments. Modest little girls of that day wore stiff, starched pantalets, pinned or buttoned to the innermost of their numerous encircling petticoats. But to wear a pair of—, a garment properly belonging to a man—that was to insult Pudor with a vengeance. I, who had never heard of feminine attire that did not include the aforementioned disgraceful doublet (worn unseen, of course), asked her how long it was before all the girls were borrowing the pattern from her wicked cousin.

This brings us to riding-habits. Any person in any age who ever looked at the subject with a detached mind knows that the only safe, suitable and comfortable way, either for horse or rider, is for the man or woman to sit astride. I forget how many centuries back what deformed

princess introduced the side-saddle; but I think that it was not more than ten years ago that fashion was still haggling over divided skirts. I remember that one sedate woman's magazine said that perhaps the divided skirt would not be so noticeable when you were on the horse; but how about when you were getting on and off? Which reminds me of the remark attributed by the Phillips Andover boys to Miss Philena MacKeen, when the waltz was first coming into fashion: "What if the music should stop?"

For a long time there had been occasional protests against the side-saddle by courageous souls. I have heard my mother say that when she was a student at the private school connected with the Brook Farm Community the head of one of the first families of Boston insisted that his little girls should learn to ride astride; but they were not able to continue this custom after they were grown up. My mother rode in the long, hampering, superfluous skirt of her day. Look now at Mount Desert, Long Island or any of the city parks. High boots, riding breeches and coats are the rule; and the occasional side-saddle looks positively mediaeval. Fashion and common sense have rarely joined forces, but when they do there is no reason why a sensible person should not follow both.

It is curious to see what plausible excuses people will give for something irrational. The girls to-day who wear furs in July and wide-open necks on the street in January assert that it is healthful, just as twenty-five years ago when I refused to adopt the custom of a high linen collar wound with three thicknesses of ribbon as appropriate for a muslin gown, my contemporaries assured me that this ironed halter was much cooler than any other way of dressing the neck.

I should be out of patience with the women who tell me they must wear thin gowns in winter because their houses are so warm had I not heard that in the forties and fifties women of fashion habitually wore low-necked woollen gowns, cut straight across the shoulders. In those days rooms were heated by stoves; hall-ways and chambers were of Arctic temperature; and woven underwear had not been invented. Consumption was prevalent, but there were probably other causes for it. To be sure, some of the old ladies, who were young then, have told me that some people had little capes made of the same material as the gown

with which they covered their shoulders; but it made you look as if you came from the country.

I am indignant when I see girls walking on icy sidewalks in low shoes and silk stockings until I remember the heavily fringed black silk *visité* that formed part of my mother's wedding outfit; and she was a winter bride. The present generation will need to be informed that coats for women had not been thought of before the Civil War; they would have been considered exceedingly masculine. Shawls and other loose wraps were the proper feminine apparel.

The truth is, that, much as there is to condemn in the modern woman's clothing, with its strong Oriental note for the house, there was never a time when it was possible to dress rationally with so little opposition as now. The outdoor girl is largely responsible for the loose, unhampered clothing of to-day. Girls cannot play tennis in the costume of the croquet era. Natural waists, free necks, short, straight skirts—all make for health. The transparent blouses are to be condemned from every point of view; but you can still buy translucent ones. I know one or two shops where you can even get flannel ones, such as I wear. The high-heeled, pointed-toed shoes are the greatest offense, but there are several hygienic brands of footgear on the market. I never thought that I should live to see the day of the unrestricted waist, but I may yet gaze on moccasins for street-wear.

When it comes to modern dancing my knowledge is derived mostly from hearsay or the pictures in the magazines. To be sure I did see a few years ago at a *fête* for a private school for girls, a school that I know to have exceptionally high moral standards, an exhibition of dancing that made my hair, metaphorically speaking, point in the same direction as the toes of the performer. The feat was exceedingly well done and the daring attitudes changed in the twinkling of an eye; but I marvelled. I also marvelled because the spectator who seemed to enjoy the spectacle most was an elderly clergyman, so far as I know of irreproachable morals, who beamed approval with every gyration.

Possibly this pirouetting is out of fashion now; but they tell me that the war, instead of abolishing the undesirable features of modern dancing, has merely introduced variations. The most striking description of abandoned prancing I have seen is Alfred Noyes's characterization: "A fat, wet

hand on a fat, wet back." And yet the poem of "The Victory Ball" is not so cynical or so denunciatory as Byron's lines about the waltz when that diversion was first introduced into England.

It is difficult to imagine sane parents' allowing their daughter to drive in a runabout with a young man between midnight and four a. m.; yet, if any of my elderly readers are willing to acknowledge rural antecedents, they must have heard their mothers speak of going to balls and not getting back till five in the morning. Of course, the conveyance in those days was a one-horse, open sleigh, but the young people were always alone. Chaperones would have been pitched into the ditch, only they had never been heard of in those days—nights, rather.

I never saw much of the old-time kissing games, even at my youthful church sociables; but any one who reads the poems of Burns will get the idea that rural romps are not exactly conducive to conventional morals. My conviction is constantly growing, the more I talk with people who were brought up in the country and have later moved to town; and it is a conviction in which social workers almost invariably concur, that as a place to bring up children in high moral standards, the farm is decidedly inferior to the city, the abode of the wicked rich. I always hoped that the statement of one of my most revered friends was exceptional when she told me that in the village where she was reared, every bride except her mother and herself was obliged to get married. Yet she was a woman who had seen a great deal of the world, and the village she spoke of was an aristocratic one on our Northern seacoast, founded in 1638.

When it comes to the decadence in our manners there is no question but the rush of modern life and the struggle for wealth are largely responsible. I, descended both from Pilgrim and Puritan ancestors, am willing to acknowledge that about the only civility left in the country is found in the South. There are several reasons for this. It is the only section of the country where the white people are of pure, Anglo-Saxon descent. They still retain the tranquil habits of settled, English society. Immigration has never upset their customs. Sudden, swollen fortunes are practically unknown. The best people live on inherited land. They still speak of County families. Everybody knows the

history and antecedents of everyone else and his precise place in the social system just as they do in the British Empire. If you were ever anybody once, no matter how great your present poverty or how menial your occupation, you still retain your social position. Little courtesies and niceties of behavior, which Northerners were taught in their youth fifty years ago and have entirely forgotten, are still in vogue in the South.

It is a fine thing theoretically that our country is advancing toward a completer democracy, but there is no question that we are losing much that is fine in our forgetfulness of history and tradition. I believe one of the most demoralizing influences in modern social life is the rush of the newly rich to our private schools and colleges. So long as vulgar plutocrats remain ignorant they can be kept in place; but when they can buy education for their children, everything is opened to them. Most colleges are raw democracies in which nothing counts so much as elbows. Given to a student self-assertiveness, robust health, average good looks, ability in some popular extra-collegiate activity like athletics or dramatics, resources that include a motor-car and a propensity to spend money freely, and unless said student is entirely lacking in the qualities of good-fellowship, he or she is likely to sweep everything before him. Fellow students, who have been taught moderation by the traditions of three centuries, may be cast into the background. And yet I have included in the foregoing list of qualifications for success nothing absolutely essential to good morals or fine manners. Intellectual attainments have always been *nil* when it comes to college popularity.

Religion has been stressed as the cure for the present decadence, and in this I should heartily agree, if I were only sure just what kind of religion is meant. I am neither Baptist nor Catholic. It happens also, that I am not Episcopalian or Unitarian, although my ancestors worshipped at King's Chapel. It seems strange to me that anyone should flout Prohibition, as some good people do, and yet strongly advocate the Ten Commandments, which are specifically admonitory or prohibitive. It has been suggested that a hint of the old-fashioned Hell could be wholesomely introduced into modern belief.

To go back South again. I understand that this comforting doctrine is quite prevalent in many religious organi-

zations there, though I never happened to attend any services at which it was preached. Yet I do not find the South more moral than the North. With all due regard to the charming and sterling qualities of our most stable section of the country, I find the South fifty years behind the times in modern thought, whether theological or purely intellectual. I cannot even except Charleston, about which Owen Wister wrote that loveliest of novels, *Lady Baltimore*; for though Charleston boasts every kind of religious organization I ever heard of, from Jewish to Christian Science, including the only French Huguenot church in America, yet even Charleston scarcely holds the pre-eminence she had before the Revolution of being one of the three intellectual centers of the country. I make instant apologies for my animadversions because I know that the South has barely recovered from the poverty and suffering of the awful Reconstruction period, and has not yet had a fair chance to show what she can do.

Perhaps this age is not so bad as it seems, even if our present religion is strongly tinged with humanitarianism. Why not be honest with children and teach them that it has never been easy to be virtuous at any time in the world's history? If you would do right, you must begin fighting early. *The fast set is always the popular set.* If you dress sensibly in any century, you run the risk of being called dowdy. If you renounce the favorite vices of any day, you will be branded as peculiar. Young people dread nothing so much as being alone, out of touch with their companions; yet why should this generation expect to be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease? We have advanced considerably from the days of the Romans and yet plenty of the old Pagan deities are more or less openly worshipped.

Still, there are some comforting thoughts. You are not absolutely cast out of modern society if you are decent. Witness the plain, unfashionable, respectable, hard-working couple now occupying the British throne (and Queen Mary wears her skirts the old-time length as anybody can see by looking at any number of *The Illustrated London News*). To be sure it is whispered that they are not the most popular couple who have ever occupied Buckingham palace; but it is quite a feat to retain a hold on any palace in these days.

One more thought and I am done. Slavery and alcohol

are legally obsolete. Shall we ever see the time when *libido, salacitas* and their ugly compeers will cease to be condoned? Is the growing practice of divorce, which so profoundly affects our modern social structure, wholly wrong?

I was brought up to regard the marriage tie as of peculiar sanctity. When I hear of a young woman, belonging to one of the best families in New York, attending hotel dances at which her recently divorced husband is also present, I am distressed at her lack of sensibility. But—I say this with deliberation, I do not think such conduct so bad for the public morals as the law of that Southern State, which permits no divorce for any cause whatever. Better Reno than Ibsen's *Ghosts*. I will go further and say that, lax as may be the modern moral judgment, I am not certain but it may be better than the Puritan vindictiveness which branded Hester Prynne with the scarlet letter.

Illegitimate children were not unknown to our virtuous forefathers, as you may see by reading Winthrop's *Journal* or engaging in any Colonial research. I shall probably be condemned for irreligious humanitarianism, and it may be necessary for me to produce testimonials as to my own private character; but I am glad to see that we are beginning to realize that the victims of white slavery are no more blameworthy than their exploiters and promoters. So much for the passing of masculine dominance in politics and industry, which after all, is the best sign of our times.

FRANCES MATHILDA ABBOTT.